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ABSTRACT

Because of the emphasis placed on language and the language process by both foreign language and special education, one must examine both the theoretical and the methodological similarities between the two areas. Even though differences between the students should be noted, what really needs to be examined is the learning process itself. This report examines several similarities between foreign languages and special education. Students in both areas have a gap in learning--special education in the total learning experience and foreign language in the acquisition of a second language. Both have individual learning styles that require attention, and both need meaningful activities to aid in the total language learning process. Both need individualization in the program. Both areas are and should be student-centered fields aimed at increasing the ability to use one's communicative skills to the best of one's ability. Although there is a wealth of research on elementary and adult learners and second-language acquisition, there is virtually no research on the middle school population. It is suggested that foreign language education should look to special education as well as other fields in search of similarities aimed at improving the teaching of foreign languages at all levels. (VWL)

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FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN THE MIDDLE SCHOOL: A SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER'S VIEW

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Abstract

Because of the emphasis placed on language and the language process by both Foreign Language and Special Education, one must examine both the theoretical and the methodological similarities between the two areas. Based on my experience as a teacher of Foreign Language, English and Special Education, one common element is very evident: the acquisition of language skills in order to communicate. Even though differences between the students should be noted, what really needs to be examined is the learning process itself. During nineteen years of teaching at the middle school level, the following similarities were noted:

1) Physical Environment—Grouping in a pre-determined arrangement by the teacher thus facilitating discussion and more individualization of instruction.
2) New Skills Development—Introduction of new strategies or adaptation of existing strategies.
3) Learning Word Meanings: Comprehension and Reading—Meaning must be understood as an integral part of the language learning process.
4) Learning to Write—Attempts should be made to gear writing to the age and interest level of the student.
5) Discussion—Techniques should imitate real-life by forcing the student to use what he knows.
6) Cultural Awareness—Understanding the language comes with understanding the people who use it

Both Foreign Language and Special Education should be student-centered, aiming at increasing the ability to use one's communicative skills to the best of one's ability.

Introduction

As a general rule, most mainstreamed educators have assumed that the special education (SE) student is unable to learn a foreign language (FL). The FL student, however, is believed to be "gifted" or "advanced" due to the privileged status that FL has had in the curriculum. This myth of elitism is explained by Herron (1982: 442), who states that "the popular image of FL study as being primarily for the academically talented student" has tended to limit student enrollment in FL. Both assumptions are false, since both FL and SE deal with the language learning process in its many parts; they do not include and preclude study based solely on academic promise.

There are differences in the two fields which require discussion. Foremost is the difference inherent in the students themselves. Generally, FL students are considered to be of average or above-average intelligence, working on or above grade level, competent in the use of their communicative skills, and lack severe social or emotional problems. The SE students are normally also of average intelligence but are working below grade or age level. This discrepancy between the FL and SE student, if not attributed to any physical cause, is usually due to a gap in the general learning experience, including but not limited to social, emotional, or learning problems. In the middle school, SE has become a haven for the problem child. These are the students who are typically denied access to the FL classroom, primarily due to a lack of understanding concerning the nature of FL. Both SE and FL could help each other by the comparing and sharing of techniques, since they draw on similar processes and methodologies.

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DISCUSSION

All fields of study have their own specific methodology including lecture, experimentation, repetition, or a combination thereof. These methods are traditional and have withstood the test of time. Although newer, more innovative approaches are being introduced, these traditional methods continue to hold their place in the educational setting due to teacher unwillingness to change or lack of familiarity with these approaches. Partly as a consequence of this, Nunan (1988:9) states that

> education has a highly developed and long-standing mythology which acts as a protective public image projected by its members. At all levels of the system, what people think they are doing, what they say they are doing, what they appear to others to be doing and what in fact they are doing, may be sources of considerable discrepancy.

In order to "teach" the SE and FL student, some basic philosophical or theoretical principles must be kept in mind. These can best be viewed by examining the theoretical and methodological similarities between SE and FL teaching. It is apparent that acquisition of language skills are common to both groups even though in the middle and high school setting, SE students are not typically enrolled in FL classes. These areas are both concerned with developing the students' ability to communicate verbally or in writing. Because of the similarities of goals, this paper will examine the similarities of methods which have been found to be numerous[1].

The traditional approach, in any subject or field, revolves around the same general principle: the teacher talks or lectures (better known in educational terms as "teaching") while the student uses passive behavior such as listening, and memorization. The student is then required to give back information to the teacher, usually in the form of a discrete-point test. This is an example of Freire's Banking Theory (1985: 22), where specific information is deposited and kept for future use, specifically when asked for by the teacher. This is too often seen in the traditional FL classroom.

Many times, the FL teacher's curriculum is dictated to by a textbook or a committee (in a non-classroom environment) who argues that a certain amount of material should be covered in a given amount of time (i.e., the Delaware FL Curriculum Guide states that a critical core of material for each level should be covered at each level). The result is that instructors lose sight of what the student actually learns in the classroom, regardless of the student's language-learning agenda.

Nunan (1989: 9) states that there is no simple one-to-one relationship between intention and reality in the classroom. As most instructors will admit, the material that any curriculum guide mandates be covered at any level is not always covered. Research (e.g., Chaudron 1988; Krashen 1983; Pieneman 1985;) has under scored the complexity of language learning and teaching and has provided insights into why there are mismatches between what is planned, what actually gets taught, and what learners learn. Nunan continues to explain that mismatches between the various curriculum perspectives can be accounted for, among other things, by speech-processing constraints such as the social, cultural and/or educational influence on individual speech patterns

(see, for example, Pieneman 1985). Thus, speech-processing is a necessary element of second language (L2) acquisition.

SIMILARITIES BETWEEN FL and SE

The teaching of FL aims at the acquisitional process of basic cognitive, linguistic and cultural skills where communication is derived essentially from interaction. According to Rivers (1987:xiii-xiv), interaction implies both reception and expression of messages. What is evident is that during the actual language interaction, restructuring moves (the continuous rephrasing of both questions and answers until the message is understood) on the part of both teacher and learner facilitate the learner's comprehension and production of the target language (Pica 1987: 7). Therefore, demands must be placed on learners to manipulate their current language system so that unclear messages become meaningful ones.

This need to communicate links FL and SE. In the middle school, children are enrolled in SE classes because they lack the basic (but very necessary) skills needed to communicate in the real world or in the artificial setting of a mainstreamed classroom. Such skills include both verbal and non-verbal behavior in a culturally appropriate environment. They need to express themselves so that they can be understood, both socially and professionally; they need to fill out employment applications; they need to write letters or notes; they need to function and in some cases, to survive depending on their environment and their handicapping condition. These are the same skills required in the FL classroom and is one of the many reasons for acquiring a FL—to learn to communicate in a specific setting: a foreign country or the FL classroom.

In both of the above instances, learners are in a similar situation. Both SE and FL students are in need of sociolinguistic remediation in order to learn the necessary communicative skills which they lack. In SE, this learning process is the re-education of a certain skill because the child never learned the skill. In the FL classroom, such acquisition entails not only the end product but also the process of becoming a speaker of the target language.

It goes without saying that re-education is done through remediation. Traditionally, remediation in the FL classroom is simply the continued repetition of the word or phrase by first the teacher and then the student until the material is memorized or learned. This remediation process, the basic premise used in the SE classroom, is traditionally handled differently—repetition in a variety of different contexts or situations until a particular skill is learned. In both the FL and SE classrooms, the traditional use of listen-repeat is being replaced by language USE in a variety of different contexts. Consequently, the two areas are moving closer, thereby facilitating language across the curriculum.

Another felt need in SE and FL is to build memory skills so that students can use certain contextualized information at some later time. In both the FL and SE classroom, the students must recall how to express an idea. This word or idea can be either verbal or nonverbal (a sign or symbol as in the art of writing, art, music, etc.), in addition to the ability to express meaning using a given sociolinguistic system. In this respect, there is no difference between the teaching of a second language and the remedial teaching of the primary language. For this reason, the learning process itself warrants some examination.

LEARNING IN THE FL AND SE CLASSROOM

Based on the underlying philosophy of the two areas, that is, the development of communicative skills, it is interesting to note the similarities of the learning process as used in both the SE and the FL classroom. Both need reinforcement in a new way of learning: the SE students because of possible inappropriateness of their response, and the FL students because they have like reference point in the L2.

Both FL and SE have a varied range of abilities within the classroom as a direct result of insufficient staff and for reasons of scheduling. Both need practical and meaningful activities to help develop these communicative skills. Without encouragement and reinforcement, the students' development may lag behind the expected performance. This occurs because we tend to consider and treat as unimportant those things which have no meaning for us. There must bean obvious link between the activity and the skill being taught in order for the student to learn. Krashen (1983:1) states that

> we acquire language when we obtain comprehensible input, when we understand what we hear or read. Acquisition is based primarily on what we hear and understand.

In addition, interest must be present.

Both the FL and SE students need high-interest activities at varying degrees of difficulty to meet the varying ability levels in both kinds of classrooms; the activities also are a means of giving students maximum exposure to the language. The SE students in need of remediation must be taught as much as possible on a one-to-one basis, since large group instruction does not meet their needs. Such a situation, although highly desirable because of individual learning differences in the FL classroom, does not frequently occur because of classroom size or budget. If the one-to-one pairing is not done, the SE students might get lost somewhere in the learning process. The role of the instructor, then, is to guide the students toward the acquisition of the target language whether a standard first language or an L2.

In order to compensate for the inability of the educational institution to provide an Individualized Educational Program in the FL classroom, cooperative learning has been employed extensively. Because no two individuals are the same, no two children will learn inexactly the same way and at exactly the same time. Nunan (1988: 48) states that one of the greatest problems for the teacher as a curriculum developer is having to construct a coherent program for inappropriately grouped learners. Both groups of students need to determine the pace at which they can best learn and the activities which are of interest to them. A schedule that is set without the prior assessment of students' strengths or weaknesses leads to a curriculum that is bound to fail, since curriculum decisions must be shared by both instructors and students.

The trend in both areas is clearly a student-centered curriculum. FL and SE need to evaluate different methods on a continuing basis to determine which ones are best suited for the individual and the group. Nunan (1988: 115) states that in a language program committed to the direct development of the sorts of skills required by learners outside the classroom, it is vitally important to create as many links as possible between what happens both inside and outside the classroom. This is the spirit of the "Writing Across the Curriculum" movement (see Klein 1991).

As a direct result of this theory, the traditional FL teacher could learn a great deal from observing an SE classroom. Following are some similarities which merit consideration.

1) PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

The first and most obvious similarity is the physical arrangement of the room itself. The desks are normally grouped in a pre-determined arrangement by the teacher. Tradition dictates that the desks are neatly ordered in rows[2]. However, this arrangement is now being replaced by groupings of two desks for SE and three or four desks for FL. Language is used for discussion; a discussion needs a group, therefore the different classroom arrangement. SE students need this grouping arrangement in order to minimize the distraction to the individual and encourage the one-to-one help they need. FL students require such an arrangement for practicing their L2 skills. Oxford, Lavine, and Crookall (1989: 35) state that such changes in classroom structure force the learners to take a larger degree of responsibility for their own learning. Learners naturally start using more social strategies as they find themselves in situations which require communication.

As previously mentioned, group work (Cooperative Learning) is common to SE and FL methodology. With grouping, one is attempting to capitalize on every students' strengths. One might try to group a student who is strong in the desired skill with one who is weak; an outspoken and friendly student would be grouped with a shy one; a good reader with a poor reader. In this way, the students help each other learn, both in a SE and FL setting. Regrouping students and permutations may be necessary in the classroom as instruction moves to a new area: when a new skill is about to be taught and practiced in order to ensure that each student's knowledge and varied innate abilities are used.

2) NEW SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

Both areas attempt to teach new skills through teacher intervention. SE attempts to help the students attain a pre-determined norm for their age group by leading them through the study process. Each student is tested until the exact spot where the study process has stopped becomes apparent; an intervention is then planned so that the student can continue successfully in his attempt to learn. In the FL classroom, the teacher has to provide a comprehensible model to the students at each step in the language learning process. Due to the age at which students are normally introduced to a second language, most individual learning styles have already been internalized. In that a second language is usually foreign to the students' native culture (as opposed to bilingualism in Québec, or parts of the American South and West), a previously successful individual learning style may not be as successful when studying a FL as it is with other academic areas. New strategies need to be introduced or old ones adapted to the new subject being learned. Chamot and Küpper (1989: 13-14) suggest a direct link between knowledge and use of specific learning strategies and affective student performance in FL, and that students vary not only in which strategies they choose to use but also on how they use the chosen strategy. They continue to state that although all students have learning strategies, some students need to be taught not only which strategies to use but also how they are to be used and for which purposes. The use of specific learning strategies is already being taught extensively in the SE classroom and is in the process of adaptation to serve the needs of the FL classroom.

3) *LEARNING WORD MEANINGS: Comprehension and Reading*

The meaning of language is an inherent part of acquiring linguistic and communicative skills. Throughout the study of FL,meaning must be taught and treated as an integral part of the language learning process; otherwise, a vital part of the foreign language will be lost. Littlewood (1981: 8-12) states that in order to show the student that meaning is important, the communicative nature of language must be emphasized. He suggests activities which aim at helping the learners to develop links with meaning that will later enable them to use the language for communicative purposes. He further states that the realism and relevance of an activity help to sustain the learners' motivation, making the actual learning of the L2 more relevant and show the student the language's probable communicative need in the future.

The FL dictation, a technique that is easily adapted to the SE classroom, is used to check for word recognition and spelling. In the SE classroom, it can still be used to check spelling and word recognition. Reading a loud to students is considered by many experts to be another useful technique by which listening skills are improved[3]. This activity is helpful in that students are better able to summarize information, to listen to word cues, and to answer questions more appropriately. The situation is similar in the FL classroom. The FL students develop a sensitivity to the sound system in addition to formulating an understanding of the (oral) text. The task for the instructor is to find high-interest and level-appropriate reading selections for both the SE and FL classrooms[4].

One way of resolving this concern in FL is to change the material of the activity by using authentic texts. Rings (1986: 203) points out that although the majority of researchers (i.e., Oxford et al. 1989; Dulay et al. 1982) agree that authentic texts should be used, the big question appears to be the definition of what an authentic text is. For the purposes of this paper, an authentic text is a text or excerpt taken from any source, i.e., a current magazine or newspaper that is used without changes. When using an authentic text, questions are usually specific to the ability of the student. The use of factual questions as opposed to inferential ones are meant to help point out the meaning of the text and should help the students understand what they are reading[5].

4) *LEARNING TO WRITE*

Closely related to the reading process is the writing process. A student who is literate in his first language and who uses sophisticated vocabulary and complex structures may feel a level of frustration when "reverting" to syntactically simple sentences such as 'John is my friend.' At best, this is a legitimate attempt on the part of both the FL student and the SE student who is only on a second-or third-grade writing level. In addition, both students probably struggle to get the correct spelling.

One way to increase the amount of writing done by students and to improve the quality of their writing is to require a diary or daily journal. A diary for the SE student is sometimes used as a form of communication with the teacher in which students write whatever they want. Normally, they write something they want the teacher to know but are reluctant to say aloud. The teacher reads their comments and sometimes answers the student. The only corrections made are for gross grammatical errors which make the meaning unclear. As long as the meaning is clear,

errors notwithstanding, the student is communicating successfully, one of the established goals for both SE and FL. This is a non-threatening way of letting the students practice their writing skills. FL students at the middle school, like all students, need to feel success when writing but are often threatened by the process because they are afraid to fail or write "baby sentences". Therefore, FL students might use a journal in which they simply make a comment about whatever interests them. The comments will become more detailed as the students' vocabulary increases. The teacher may read the entry and comment on the writing not by correcting each mistake but by making remarks which indicate the teacher's understanding of the content. Semke (1984: 200) found that on each of the measures of language ability where there was significant difference among treatments, group 1, which received only comments and not error correction, showed more progress than the groups which received direct correction[6]. She found that correction does not improve students' writing skills in a second language, nor does it increase total competency in that language. These findings coincide with the position of Kelly (1978) that students will seek advice on how to improve the mechanics of their writing when they realize that they are communicating and that someone understands their message. The above non-threatening activity can be performed as a homework assignment or as a daily in-class activity. The main goal is to increase the frequency of writing. This activity is just as challenging for the SE students, whose problem is the lack of the necessary skills needed to record the spoken word, as it is for the FL student who lacks the necessary word to record. Hence, in an effort to communicate, students make linguistic gains, e.g., they refine syntax, build vocabulary, and they communicate in a given context.

5) DISCUSSION TECHNIQUES

Another area of similarity is that of discussion. The SE child has some degree of difficulty in carrying on a focused conversation. One of the reasons for students' being labeled SE is the inability to express themselves and make themselves understood. Strategic Interaction (SI), a method borrowed from FL, is useful to both areas. DiPietro (1988) explains that a scenario in the SI method is an open-ended situation in which the participants decide which direction the action of the scenario will take. This appears to be very difficult for both groups of students. The FL students are in a similar situation in that they do not have the words or expressions needed to express themselves in a way that the scenario can be brought to a logical conclusion. Like real-life situations, the students must use what they know to resolve whichever situation they encounter. The scenario gives students the chance to imitate real life and forces them to use all pertinent knowledge.

In FL, this inability of expression is produced, in large part, by the audio-lingual method (ALM) of instruction. This method is still used to some extent, despite improved methods such as SI and the Natural Approach (see Krashen 1983). Syntax and there combination of forms are central to ALM. The fallacy, common to both FL and SE, in this method is that it does not acknowledge the fact that language is made up of ideas and meaning in context, not just isolated words (see Kemp 1956: 20). Vocabulary is not the key element in the students' ability to express themselves, but rather one of many important components. The most important part of the ability for expression is making use of the vocabulary one has learned to satisfy one's personal goals. This is exactly what takes place when using DiPietro's SI scenarios. The scenario forces students to use their own vocabulary base in order to satisfy their own personal goals.

Language-building textbooks, in any area or language, teach words. This method, which relies on vocabulary development, is a stumbling block to the teaching of language as a means of fulfilling self-constructed goals. They stress the importance of individual words to the point where the functional use of the words is lost. Whether in the first or second language, words cannot and should not be taught in isolation since language is more than just vocabulary words. The crucial ingredient in language acquisition is comprehensible input so that the student can understand language (Krashen 1983: 1).

For example, when teaching articles of clothing in a second language, most traditional textbooks simply list the names of the articles of clothing, give a short dialog (which usually is not relevant) and proceed to a number of directed exercises, probably grammatical in nature. Many students have difficulty remembering these words because they do not need to use the clothing words in order to communicate in these exercises. An activity such as a fashion show requires the use of ideas and allows for recycling of colors (vocabulary), related expressions, and various other structures which emphasize the use of the thought process. Similarly in SE, such an activity greatly aids the students' oral expression. They must not only use words but use them correctly to express ideas, a principle behind Writing Across the Curriculum or Curriculum Based Instruction (see Klein 1991).

Another common activity is the use of Bingo or similar activities when teaching number, letter, or word recognition. This seems unsophisticated to middle schoolers; however, they are not above completing simple math equations in the second language as a class activity. Nor are they above playing word or number Bingo, especially if it is for a reward. Picture cards, which teach vocabulary development, would be better used if the student were asked to describe the picture instead of simply identifying it as is the philosophy behind the Advanced Placement course of study. According to Littlewood (1981: 20) the main purpose of an activity is that learners should use the language they know in order to get meanings across as effectively as possible. The degree to which this is done, of course, depends on the students' level and degree of competence in the language. Competence necessitates the translation of the needed word, and more importantly, the translation of its contextual meaning. Therefore, what needs to be learned is embedded in the activity. In other words, one speaks to act, not acts to speak.

6) CULTURAL AWARENESS

The last area which concerns both FL and SE is cultural awareness. Students in both areas need to be exposed to and taught how to deal with cultural norms. Often, students are placed in SE due to their socially inappropriate behavior. Whatever the covert reason for this behavior, it is usually due to frustration at not being able to express themselves adequately, as was explained previously. Role-playing and scenarios are good methods for teaching culture, especially when enhanced by discussion, films, readings, etc. In FL, cultural similarities and differences are commonly taught[7]. Using scenarios from DiPietro's SI method, students may see the options that they have in any given situation as in the following example:

> John asks his friend, Bob, for the answers to a major history test. John is the star football player and needs to pass this test or he will not be able to play in Saturday's game. Bob can either pretend not to have heard John or he can tell the teacher and risk having the entire

school angry with him for keeping John from playing. Bob was always taught that he should be honest above all else. How is Bob going to resolve his dilemma?

There are a number of options open to Bob. He must find the one that will best resolve the situation so that he can satisfy both his conscience and his wish to have his team win the game.

Because real-life situations do not ensure a pre-determined response by another person, it would appear that in this particular situation, the scenario is a more appropriate teaching method than role-playing. Similarly in FL, scenarios are useful because the student can direct the situation in a direction with which he is most comfortable. Usually, the students opt for the direction in which they can most readily express themselves. If the students falter, help comes from the group. Through group prompting (Cooperative Learning), students can begin to develop good communicative sentences to express their ideas.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

We have examined several areas of similarities between FL and SE. Both students have a gap in learning--SE in the total learning experience and FL in the L2 acquisition. Both have individual learning styles that require attention. Both need meaningful activities to aid in the total language learning process. Both need individualization in the program. In both areas, we are dealing with the total language process or with one of its many components. Both FL and SE are and should be student-centered fields aimed at increasing the ability to use one's communicative skills to the best of one's ability.

Although there is a wealth of research on elementary and adult learners and L2 acquisition, there is virtually no research on the middle school population. At a time when cutbacks make numbers so important, the SE population should not be ignored as potential students for any FL program.

Some possible areas for future research include the use of resource personnel to assist in the mainstreamed FL classroom. FL should look not only to SE but also to other fields in search of similarities aimed at improving the teaching of FL at all levels, not only the middle school. More research is needed at this level for both L2 acquisition as well as standard language remediation. FL and SE should work together to establish a possible combination of teaching methods which would benefit both fields since both areas are concerned with teaching global language competency.

The implications are clear. Because of the emphasis placed obviously on language and the language process by both the FL and SE theories, both areas should look to each other for help and advice. These are not mutually exclusive fields which are perceived to be opposed one to the other. We should look beyond the assumptions made by these labels and look at each student as an individual.

Endnotes

1. These similarities were noted when all my classes (FL, Engl., and SE) were given the same dictation in exactly the same way. Only the original language of the dictation was translated into the target language. The results were interesting. The FL classes had difficulty following the general idea of the dictation and remembering not only what to write but also how to spell it. The English classes had difficulty with the spelling of some of the words they heard. The SE classes had trouble with both the spelling and with remembering what to write. Noting these results, I attempted to adapt methods from one area to another as the need arose. It appeared that the samething was being taught to all the classes: global language competency.

2. In the old one-room schoolhouse, desks were one piece units with chairs attached to the front of each desk for use by the student sitting directly in front. To make sure that everyone could see the board, students were seated by height. Hence, the orderly rows of desks. This arrangement is still found in many traditional classrooms today.

3. This has been a very useful activity for students in both FL and SE classrooms. Both groups sit and listen attentively to stories as evidenced by their constantly asking to hear another one.

4. In SE, one factor involves, for example, a 14-year-old boy who reads on a third-grade level. He certainly has little motivation to read about a clown at the circus. The problem is finding topics which interest students at this age, such as race-car driving or wrestling, but which will not frustrate them when attempting to read.

5. When teaching English, i.e. The Christmas Carol or The Tell-TaleHeart, I have found that including a vocabulary list and a study guide (a list of specific factual or informational questions) greatly helps the students' comprehension of the plot. Normally, I do not include inferential questions. These are used later for a general discussion of any story (not used for level 1 of any L2).

6. It is interesting to note that students in group 1 believed that there should have been more correction of errors on their work.

7. In some instances, the L2 culture has components that are completely opposite from ours. One example is the European custom of two friends walking down the street either holding hands or arm-in-arm. This is done as a non-verbal expression of friendship. When the FL students are exposed to this custom, they often feel uneasy. They find it difficult to believe that individuals would participate in an activity which is so different from theirs. Another custom is shaking hands by all members of society on introduction, not just business men, as is customary in our society. Our children tend to shy away from touching or being touched in this way.

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